

"Quite a number of things," she answered. "For one, I can't solve a certain mystery that plagues me."

Joe Quigley finished making out the way bill. His eyes danced as he handed Penny her receipt.

"So you admit that you've met your Waterloo in our Galloping Ghost?"

"I admit nothing," Penny retorted. "You could help me if you would!"

"How?"

"I'm sure you know the person who has been causing the Burmasters so much trouble."

"Trouble?" Quigley's eyebrows jerked. "The way I look at it, that Headless Horseman may do 'em a good turn. He may actually save their worthless necks by driving them out of the valley."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that Burmaster can't keep on in his bull headed fashion without bringing tragedy upon himself as well as the valley. Even now it's probably too late to reinforce the dam."

"Then what does your prankster hope to gain?"

"You'll have to ask him," Joe Quigley shrugged. "This is the way I look at it. Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters are deep in a feud. The old lady lost the deed to her place and she figures if she moves off, the Burmasters somehow will take advantage of her."

"They've made no attempt to do so?"

"Not yet. But old Mrs. Lear is convinced Mrs. Burmaster is biding her time."

"It all sounds rather silly."

"Maybe it does to an outsider. But this is the serious part. If the dam should let go there'd be no chance to warn either the Burmasters or Mrs. Lear. Both places should be evacuated."

"Then why isn't it done?"

"Because two stubborn women refuse to listen to reason. Mrs. Burmaster won't budge because she says there's no danger—that it's a scheme to get her out of the valley. Mrs. Lear won't leave her home while the Burmasters stay."

"What's to be done?"

"Ask me something easy." The telegraph instrument was chattering the Delta station call again so Quigley turned to answer it. "If you see Mrs. Lear before you leave here, try to reason with her," he tossed over his shoulder. "I've given up."

The girls nodded goodbye and went outside. Silas Malcom's wagon was nowhere to be seen, and after a brief debate they decided to walk to Mrs. Lear's place.

"Maybe we still can catch a ride home with Salt," Louise remarked dubiously. "With all this talk about the dam, I certainly don't relish spending a night in the valley."

"Oh, Silas said there was no immediate danger unless it rains again," Penny reminded her chum. "What Joe Quigley said about Mrs. Lear worries me. We must try to get her to leave the valley."

"Why not move a mountain?" Louise countered. "It would be a lot easier."

When the girls reached Mrs. Lear's cabin they discovered that word of their arrival in Delta had traveled ahead of them.

"Your room's all ready fer you," the old lady beamed as she greeted them at the door. "This time I hope you're stayin' fer a week."

Nothing seemed changed at the Lear cabin. Mrs. Lear had spent the morning canning fruit, and the kitchen table was loaded with containers. A washing flapped lazily on the line. While waiting for the clothes to dry, the old lady filled in her time by sewing on a rag rug of elaborate pattern.

"I'm a mite behind in my work," she confessed to her young visitors. "These infernal rains set a body back. Fer three days I couldn't get my washin' hung, an' I never will git my corn dried less I do it in the oven."

"Speaking of rain," Penny began hesitantly. "Don't you think it's dangerous to remain here much longer?"

"Maybe it is, maybe it ain't," the old lady retorted. "Either way I'm not worryin'. There ain't nothin'

going to put me off my place—not even a flood."

"Joe Quigley thinks that you and the Burmasters both should move to a safer place."

"Then let 'em go fust," Mrs. Lear declared. "Didn't Mrs. Burmaster steal the deed to my land jest fer meanness and spite? If I was dumb enough to leave this place fer an hour she'd find some way to git it away from me."

"That couldn't be done so easily," smiled Penny. "After all, Mr. Burmaster has more sense than his wife. Did you never talk to him about the missing deed?"

"We had words," Mrs. Lear said with emphasis. "'Course he stood up fer his wife—said she'd never do such a thing. But I know better!"

"Yet since the deed disappeared no one has tried to put you off your land."

"That's cause the Burmasters are waitin' their chance. Oh, they're sly and cunning. But I'm jest as smart as they are, and they'll never git me off this place!"

The discussion, Penny felt, was traveling in the same familiar circle. One could not influence Mrs. Lear. Her mind had been made up. Nothing would move her.

Thinking that they might at least talk matters over with Mr. Burmaster, the girls presently walked down the road to Sleepy Hollow estate. A workman who

was busy with hammer and saw told them that Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster had motored to Delta for the afternoon.

"What are you building?" Penny inquired curiously. "A gate?"

"You might call it that," he grinned. "Mr. Burmaster ordered me to knock together a couple of 'em, one for each end of the bridge."

"Oh! I see!" Light dawned upon Penny. "Moveable barriers to trap the Headless Horseman prankster!"

"It's a lot o' nonsense if you ask me," the workman grumbled. "That fellow ain't been around here in a week. Reckon he may never show up again."

"Yet Mr. Burmaster keeps watch of the bridge?"

"Every night. That wife of his wouldn't give him no peace if he didn't." The workman hammered a nail into place and added: "The Burmasters have got something to worry about if they only had sense enough to realize it."

"You mean the Huntley Dam?"

The workman nodded. "I'm quittin' here tonight," he confessed. "Maybe that dam will hold, but I'm takin' no chances!"

Penny and Louise were even more troubled as they walked back to Mrs. Lear's home. A fine supper awaited them. They scarcely did justice to it and

found it difficult to respond to the old lady's cheerful conversation.

"She just doesn't seem to realize that she's in any danger," Louise whispered despairingly to her chum as they did the dishes together.

"Oh, she knows," Penny replied. "But Mrs. Lear is set in her ways. I doubt anyone can induce her to take to the hills."

After the dishes had been put away, the girls played card games with the old lady. Promptly at nine o'clock Mrs. Lear announced that it was bed time. As she locked up the doors for the night she stood for a time on the back porch, staring thoughtfully at the clouds.

"It looks like rain again," Penny remarked.

Mrs. Lear said nothing. She closed the door firmly and turned the key.

Once in their bedroom, the girls undressed quickly and blew out the light. For awhile they could hear Mrs. Lear moving about on the bare floor of her own room. Then the house became quiet.

"I'll be glad when we're home again," Louise whispered, snuggling down under the quilts. "Think how wet we'd get if that dam should break tonight!"

"Stop talking about it or you'll give me nightmares!" Penny chided. "Let's go to sleep."

Try as they would, the girls could not settle down.

First Penny would twist and turn and then Louise would do her share of squirming. Finally just as they were beginning to feel drowsy, they were startled to hear a drumming sound on the tin roof above their heads.

"What was that?" Louise muttered, sitting up.

The sounds were coming faster and faster now.

"Rain!" Penny exclaimed.

Jumping out of bed, she went to the window. Already the panes were splashed and rivulets were chasing one another to the sill.

"If this isn't the worst luck yet!" she muttered. "It looks like a hard rain too."

Louise joined her chum at the window. Disheartened, they gazed toward the woods and the hills. Ominous warnings arose in their minds to plague them. With an added burden of water could the dam hold? Sleep seemed out of the question. Wrapping blankets about them, the girls drew chairs to the window and watched.

Then as suddenly as the rain had started, it ceased. A moon struggled through a jagged gap of the clouds. The woods and the barn became discernible once more.

"Rain's over," Louise said, covering a yawn. "Let's go to bed, Penny."

Penny gathered up the quilts from the floor. But as she turned away from the window, an object out-

side the house captured her attention. For an instant she thought that she was mistaken. Then she gripped Louise's hand, pulling her back to the sill.

"What is it?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

"Look over there!" Penny commanded.

From the woods across the road the girls could see a moving light.

"Someone with a lantern," Louise said indifferently.

"Watch!" Penny commanded again.

Even as she spoke, the lantern was waved in a half circle from side to side. The strange movement was repeated several times.

"What do you make of it?" Louise whispered in awe.

"I suspect someone is trying to signal this house," Penny replied soberly. "Let's keep quiet and see what we can learn."

CHAPTER

15

INTO THE WOODS

FOR SEVERAL minutes nothing very spectacular happened. At intervals the strange lantern signals were repeated.

"It looks to me as if that person over in the woods is trying to signal someone here!" Penny said, peering from behind the window curtain.

"Mrs. Lear?" asked Louise.

"Who else? Certainly no one would have reason to try to attract our attention."

"But why should anyone come here tonight?"

As the girls speculated upon the meaning of the mysterious signals, they heard a door at the end of the hall softly open. Footsteps padded noiselessly past their door.

"Are you asleep, girls?" Mrs. Lear's voice chirped.

Louise would have answered had not Penny clapped a hand firmly over her mouth.

After a moment the footsteps pattered on down the stairway.

"Where can Mrs. Lear be going?" Penny speculated in a whisper. "She wanted to make certain that we were asleep."

The girls did not have long to wait. Soon they heard an outside door close. A moment later they saw the spry old lady crossing the yard to the barn. She was fully dressed and wore a grotesque tight-waisted jacket as protection against the biting night wind.

Penny turned her gaze toward the woods once more. The lantern signals had ceased.

"What do you think is going on?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

Penny reached for her clothing which had been left in an untidy heap on the floor. "I don't know," she replied grimly. "With luck we'll find out."

They dressed as quickly as they could. As Penny was pulling on her shoes she heard the barn door close. She rushed to the window. Old Lady Lear, riding with an easy grace that belied her years, was walking Trinidad toward the road.

"Now where's she going?" Penny demanded, seizing Louise by the hand. "Come on, or we'll never learn!"

Clattering down the stairs, they reached the yard in time to see Mrs. Lear riding into the woods.

"Know what I think?" Louise asked breathlessly. "She's the one who's been pulling off these Headless Horseman stunts!"

"Someone signaled to her from the woods," Penny reminded her chum. "She's starting off to meet whoever flashed the lantern!"

To attempt to follow the old lady afoot seemed a foolish thing to do. Nevertheless, Penny was convinced that Mrs. Lear would not ride far into the woods. She argued that a golden opportunity would be lost forever if they did not try to learn where she went.

"Then come on if we must do it!" Louise consented. "It won't be easy to keep her in sight though."

In their haste the girls had provided themselves with no light. Nor had they imagined that a night could be so dark. Once among the trees they had difficulty in keeping to the trail that old Mrs. Lear had chosen.

"Let's turn back," Louise pleaded. "We're apt to get lost."

Penny, however, was stubbornly determined to learn the old lady's destination. Though she could not see Trinidad she could hear the crashing of underbrush only a short distance ahead.

"Penny, I can't keep on!" Louise gasped a moment later. "I'm winded."

"You're scared," Penny amended. "Well, so am I. But it's just as easy to go on now as it is to turn back."

The trail Mrs. Lear had taken led at a steep angle uphill. The old lady allowed her horse to take his time. Even so, the girls were hard pressed to keep fairly close.

"Listen!" Penny presently commanded in a whisper.

No longer could they hear the sound of Trinidad's hoofbeats.

"We've lost her," Louise said anxiously.

"I think Mrs. Lear has stopped," Penny replied, keeping her voice low. "Perhaps she heard us and suspects that we followed her."

More cautiously than before, the girls moved forward. It was well that they did, for unexpectedly they came to a brook and a clearing. Mrs. Lear had dismounted and tied Trinidad to an elm tree close to the water's edge.

Huddling behind a clump of bushes, the girls waited and watched. Mrs. Lear did not appear to be expecting anyone. She gave Trinidad a friendly pat. Then making certain that he was securely fastened to the tree, walked briskly toward the girls.

Penny and Louise cringed closer to the ground. The old lady passed them and went on down the trail.

"You stay here and keep watch of Trinidad!" Penny instructed. "I'll follow Mrs. Lear."

Louise did not want to remain alone. She started to say so, but Penny was gone.

The moment her chum had vanished from sight, sheer panic took possession of Louise. An owl hooted. The cry sent icy chills racing down the girl's spine.

Tensely she listened. She was certain she could hear footsteps approaching the brook. Suddenly she lost all interest in solving the mystery. Her one desire was to get safely out of the woods. Shamelessly, she turned and fled.

Penny, doggedly following Mrs. Lear, was startled to hear a crashing of the bushes behind her. As she paused, Louise came running up.

"What is it?" Penny demanded. "Did someone come for Trinidad?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Louise answered grimly. "Call me a coward if you like—I'll not stay by myself!"

Penny did not chide her chum, though she was disappointed. A moment's thought convinced her that since Louise was unwilling to remain by the brook, it now would be better for them both to trail Mrs. Lear. If they were not to lose her, they must hasten along.

"Where do you think the old lady is going?" Louise presently asked as they stumbled over a vine-clogged trail. "Not back home."

"No," Penny agreed in a whisper, "we're going in the wrong direction for that."

Unexpectedly, the girls emerged into a clearing. Not daring to cross the open space lest Mrs. Lear see them, they huddled at the fringe of trees. Overhead, dark clouds scudded and boiled; a strengthening wind whipped their clothing about them.

Mrs. Lear moved spryly across the open space. Pausing near the edge of a cliff, she crouched beside a huge boulder. Grasping a bush for support, she peered down into the valley.

"We may be directly above Sleepy Hollow estate!" Penny whispered excitedly. "Let's try to get closer and see!"

Treading cautiously over the sodden leaves, the girls made a wide circle along the edge of trees. Keeping a safe distance from Mrs. Lear, they peered down over the rim of the valley. As Penny had guessed, Sleepy Hollow was to be seen below. A light, dimly visible, burned on the lower floor of the dwelling. They barely were able to discern the long, narrow bridge spanning the mill pond.

"Now why do you suppose Mrs. Lear came here at this time of night?" Louise speculated. "Do you think—"

Penny gave her chum a quick little jab. From far away she had caught the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

"The Headless Horseman!" Louise whispered in awe.

"We'll soon see. Mrs. Lear is waiting for something!"

Minutes elapsed. Penny began to doubt that she had heard an approaching horseman. Then suddenly he emerged from a thicket that edged the valley road. The rider was garbed in white which plainly silhouetted his huge, misshapen body. Where his head should have been there was nothing.

The sight of such an apparition did not seem to dismay old Mrs. Lear. The old lady leaned farther over the cliff, fairly hugging herself with delight.

Having gained the road leading to Sleepy Hollow, the horseman came on at a swift pace. Sparks flew from the steel shod hoofs as they clipped smartly on the stones.

Penny's gaze swept ahead of the ghost rider to the bridge. Her heart leaped. Even as the horseman rode onto the structure, workmen sprang from the thickets at either side of the road. High wooden barriers were jerked into place at both ends of the bridge. The Headless Horseman's retreat was cut off.

"They've got him!" Penny whispered tensely. "He's trapped on the bridge!"

The horse faltered for an instant and slackened speed. Then as the mysterious rider apparently urged him on, he bore down on the barrier blocking the bridge's exit.

"He's going to try to jump!" Louise murmured. "But no one could take such a high barrier!"

Nervously the girls watched. By this time they were certain that the horse was Trinidad. Magnificent though he was, age had crept upon him, and the wooden gate could prove a difficult test for a trained jumper.

If Penny and Louise were tense, Mrs. Lear was even more so. "Take it, Trinidad!" they heard her mutter. "Over!"

Trinidad did not falter. Approaching the barrier at full tilt, he gathered his strength, and cleared the structure in a beautiful, clean leap. The startled workmen, amazed at the feat, fell back out of the way. Only one made any attempt to stop the rider. The Headless Horseman plunged his gallant steed through a gap in the trees and was gone.

"You did it Trinidad!" cackled Mrs. Lear. "You showed 'em!"

Stooping to pick up a pebble, the old lady hurled it contemptuously toward the bridge. Her aim though carelessly taken was surprisingly good. The stone fell with a loud, resounding thud on the bridge planks.

"Let 'em wonder where that came from!" the old lady chuckled gleefully. "Let 'em wonder."

Wrapping her black coat about her, she quickly retreated into the woods.

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

"WE'LL GIVE Mrs. Lear a little start and then follow," Penny instructed. "Undoubtedly she'll return to the brook to meet the Headless Horseman."

"Then you believe she's been behind the scheme from the first?" Louise asked, backing away from the cliff's crumbling edge. Below, on the grounds of Sleepy Hollow, men roved about with lighted lanterns. Apparently no very vigorous effort was being made to pursue the mysterious rider into the woods.

"Who else?" Penny countered. "At least she's been a party to it."

"But she's not actually the rider. We know that."

"She certainly knows the identity of the man," Penny said with conviction. "And we should too before the night's over. Come on!"

Fearful lest Mrs. Lear get too much of a start, the girls set off in pursuit. However, they had not gone far before they realized that the old lady was not re-

turning to the brook. Instead she seemed to be heading for home.

"We didn't figure this so well after all!" Penny observed in deep disgust. "Now it's too late to go back to the brook, so we've lost our chance to learn who the fellow is."

"Maybe not," Louise said cheerfully. "Someone will have to bring Trinidad home."

They had now reached the main road with Mrs. Lear's cabin visible over the hill. Not once glancing over her shoulder, the old lady trod a muddy path to her own gate. Once inside the grounds, she peered up at the windows of the bedroom Penny and Louise had occupied. Satisfied that no light was burning, she quietly entered the house.

The two girls waited for awhile in the woods. They thought it wise to give the old lady ample time to go to bed and fall asleep.

"Come on, we've waited long enough," Penny said at last.

They crossed the road and stole to the front door. To their astonishment it was locked. The back door also was fastened from the inside.

"We'll have to try a window," Penny proposed.

The windows also were locked or so stuck by dampness that they could not be budged.

"If this isn't a pretty mess!" Penny exclaimed impatiently. "Mrs. Lear never used to lock anything.

She must have started doing it since the deed to her property disappeared."

"What are we going to do? Sleep in the barn?"

"That might not be such a bad idea. Then if Trinidad ever comes home we'd be able to see who rode him!"

"You'll have to get another idea!" Louise retorted. "That old barn has rats and mice. I wouldn't sleep there for a million dollars."

Penny circled the house, searching for a way out of the difficulty. She could find no ladder. A rose trellis rising along the front wall suggested that if they could use it to reach the second story, they might creep along the porch roof to their own room. There at least, the window had been left unlocked.

"It looks flimsy," Penny said, testing the structure. "I'll try it first."

Gingerly she climbed the trellis, trying to avoid the thorns of a withered rose plant. She reached the porch roof and skillfully rolled onto it. From there she motioned for her chum to follow.

Louise was heavier than Penny and less adept at climbing. The rose bush tore at her clothing and wounded her arms. Just as she was reaching for Penny's outstretched hand one of the cross pieces gave way. Startled, Louise let out a scream of terror.

"Now you've done it!" Penny muttered, pulling

her by brute force onto the porch. "Mrs. Lear's deaf if she didn't hear that!"

Tiptoeing with frantic haste across the porch roof, they tested the window of their bedroom. It raised easily. But as they scrambled over the sill, the girls were dismayed to hear Mrs. Lear's door open farther down the hall.

"She heard us!" Louise whispered tensely. "Now what'll we do?"

"Into bed and cover up!" Penny ordered.

Not even taking time to remove their shoes, they made a dive for the big four-poster bed. Scarcely had they pulled the coverlet up to their ears than they heard Mrs. Lear just outside the door.

"Are you all right?" she called anxiously. "I thought I heard a scream."

The girls did not answer. They closed their eyes and pretended to be asleep. Mrs. Lear opened the door and peeped inside. Not entirely satisfied she crossed the room and stood for a moment at the open window. Closing it half way, she then tiptoed out the door.

"Was that a close call!" Penny whispered, sitting up in bed. "Lucky for us she didn't notice anything wrong."

Waiting a few minutes longer, the girls slid from beneath the covers and quickly undressed.

"At least we learned one important thing tonight," Penny observed, quietly lowering a shoe to the floor. "Mrs. Lear is behind this Headless Horseman escapade. But who is the fellow?"

"Silas Malcom perhaps. Only he's a bit too old for pranks."

Penny did not reply. Moving to the window, she gazed thoughtfully toward the barn.

"Someone may bring Trinidad back," she commented. "By watching—"

"Not for me," Louise cut in. She rolled back into bed. "I'm going to get myself a little shut-eye before dawn."

Penny drew a chair up to the window. The room was cold. Her chair was straight-backed and hard. Minutes dragged by and still Trinidad did not put in an appearance.

"The horse may not come back tonight," Penny thought, covering a yawn. "Guess I'll jump into bed. I can hear just as well from there."

She snuggled in beside Louise and enjoyed the warmth of the covers. A delightful drowsiness took possession of her. Though she struggled to stay awake, her eyelids became heavier and heavier.

Presently Penny slept. She slept soundly. When she awakened, the first rays of morning light were seeping in through the window. But it was not the sun that had aroused her from slumber. As she stirred

drowsily, she became aware of an unusual sound. At first she could not place it. Then she realized that someone was pounding on the downstairs screen door.

Penny nudged Louise. When that did not arouse her, she gave her a vigorous shake.

"What now?" Louise mumbled crossly.

"Wake up! Someone's downstairs pounding on the screen door."

"Let 'em pound." Louise rolled away from her chum's grasp and tried to go back to sleep.

The thumping noise was repeated, louder and more insistent. Penny was sure she heard the rumble of many voices. Thoroughly puzzled, she swung out of bed and reached for a robe.

"Open up!" called a man's voice from below.

Penny ran to the window. The porch roof half obstructed her view, but in the yard she could see at least half a dozen men. Others were at the door, hammering to be let in.

By this time the thumpings had thoroughly awakened Louise. She too deserted the bed and went to the window.

"Something's wrong!" she exclaimed. "Just see that mob of men! I'll warrant they're here to make trouble for Mrs. Lear—perhaps because of what happened last night!"

ACCUSATIONS

PENNY AND Louise scrambled into their clothes. As they pulled on their shoes, they heard Mrs. Lear going down the hall. Fearful lest she encounter trouble, they hastened to overtake her before she reached the front door.

"Do you think it's safe to let those men in?" Penny ventured dubiously.

"Why shouldn't I open the door?" Mrs. Lear demanded. "I've nothing to hide."

She gazed sharply at Penny, who suddenly was at a loss for words.

Mrs. Lear swung wide the door to face the group of men on the porch. Joe Quigley was there and so was Silas Malcom. Seeing friends, Penny and Louise felt reassured.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Lear, though not in an unfriendly tone. "What's the meaning of waking a body up in the middle o' the night?"

"Word just came in by radio," Joe Quigley spoke up. "There's been a big rain over Goshen way."

"I could have told you that last night," Mrs. Lear replied, undisturbed. "Knew it when I seen them big clouds bilin' up."

"You oughter get out o' here right away," added Silas Malcom. "That dam at Huntley Lake ain't safe no more, and when all that water comes down from Goshen it ain't too likely she'll hold."

"Are the people of Delta leaving for the hills?" Mrs. Lear asked coldly.

"Some are," Quigley assured her. "We're urging everyone who can to take the morning train. A few stubborn ones like yourself refuse to budge."

"Oh, so I'm stubborn! I suppose you're leaving, Joe Quigley?"

"That's different. I have a job to do and I can't desert my post at the depot."

"And the Burmasters? Are they leaving?"

"We're on our way up to the estate now to warn them."

"I'll make you a bargain," Mrs. Lear agreed, a hard glint in her eye. "If Mrs. Burmaster goes, then I'll go too. But so long as she stays in this valley I'm not stirrin' one inch!"

"You're both as stubborn as one of Silas' mules!" Joe Quigley said impatiently. "Don't you realize that your life is in danger?"

"When you've lived as long as I have, young man, life ain't so precious as some other things."

"If you won't listen to reason yourself, what about these girls?" Quigley turned toward Penny and Louise.

Mrs. Lear's face became troubled. "They'll have to go at once," she decided. "What time's that train out o' Delta?"

"Eleven-forty," Joe Quigley replied. "Or they can catch it at Witch Falls at eleven. Getting on at that station they might find seats."

"We'll pack our things right away," Louise promised, starting for the stairs.

Penny followed reluctantly. Though she realized that it would be foolhardy to remain, she did not want to leave Red Valley. Particularly she disliked to desert old Mrs. Lear.

"If Mrs. Lear is determined to stay here, what can we do about it?" Louise argued reasonably. "You know our folks wouldn't want us to remain."

The girls quickly gathered their belongings together and went downstairs again. To their surprise Mrs. Lear had put on her coat and was preparing to accompany the men to Sleepy Hollow.

"I ain't leavin' fer good," she announced, observing Penny's astonished gaze. "Leastwise, not unless the Burmasters do. I'm going there now to see what they've got to say."

"Come along if you like," one of the men invited the girls. "Maybe you can help persuade them to leave the valley."

Penny and Louise doubted that they would be of any assistance whatsoever. However, it was several hours before train time, so they were very glad indeed to ride in one of the cars to Sleepy Hollow estate. At the crossroad Joe Quigley turned back to Delta for he was scheduled to go on duty at the railroad station. The others kept on until they reached the estate.

Silas Malcom rapped sharply on the front door. In a moment a light went on in an upstairs room. A few minutes later a window opened and Mr. Burmaster, clad in pajamas, peered down.

"What's wanted?" he demanded angrily.

"There's been a big rain above us," he was told. "Everyone's being advised to get out while there's time."

Mr. Burmaster was silent a moment. Then he said: "Wait a minute until I dress. We'll talk about it."

Ten minutes elapsed before the estate owner opened the front door and bade the group enter. He led the party into a luxuriously furnished living room.

"Now what is all this?" Mr. Burmaster asked. "We had one disturbance here last night and it seems to me that's about enough."

Silas Malcom explained the situation, speaking quietly but with force.

"And who says that the dam won't hold?" Mr. Burmaster interrupted.

"Well, it's the opinion of them that's been workin' on it for the past two weeks. If we'd had money and enough help—"

"So that's why you rooted me out of bed!"

"We came here to do you a favor!" one of the men retorted angrily. "It's too late to save the dam unless nature sees fit to spare her. But it ain't too late for you and your household to get out of here."

"I have two hundred thousand dollars sunk in this place."

"That's a heap o' money," Silas said thoughtfully. "But it ain't going to mean anything to you if that dam lets go. You ought to leave here without waitin'."

"Perhaps you're right," Mr. Burmaster said, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. "It was my judgment that the dam would hold. Naturally no one could predict these heavy, unseasonable rains."

A door opened. Everyone turned to see Mrs. Burmaster on the threshold. Her hair was uncombed and she wore a brilliant red housecoat.

"Who are these people?" she asked her husband in a cold voice.

"Villagers. They've come to warn us that we ought to leave here."

"Warn us, indeed!" Mrs. Burmaster retorted bitterly. "I don't know what they've said to you, but it's just another scheme to get us away from here! Haven't they tried everything?"

"This ain't no Headless Horseman scare, Ma'am," spoke Silas Malcom. "The Huntley dam is likely to give way at any minute."

"I've heard that for weeks!" Mrs. Burmaster's gaze was scornful. "Oh, I know you've hated us ever since we built this house! You've tried every imaginable trick to make us leave."

"That ain't true, ma'am," Silas replied soberly.

Mrs. Burmaster's angry gaze swept the group and came to rest on Mrs. Lear.

"That old witch who lives down the road has set you all against me!" she fairly screamed. "She's lied and fought me at every turn!"

Mrs. Lear detached herself from the group. She spoke quietly but with suppressed fury.

"I've stood a lot from you in the past, Mrs. Burmaster," she retorted. "But there ain't no one alive can call me a witch!"

"Oh, I can't?" Mrs. Burmaster mocked. "Well, you're worse than an old witch!"

"At least I ain't a sneak thief! I don't go breakin' into folks' houses to steal the deed to their property!"

"How dare you accuse me of such a thing!"

"Because I know you got the deed to my cabin right here in the house!" Mrs. Lear accused. "You've got it hid away!"

"That's a lie!"

"Ladies! Ladies!" remonstrated one of the men from the village.

Mrs. Lear paid not the slightest heed. Advancing toward Mrs. Burmaster, she waved a bony finger at her.

"So it's a lie, is it?" she cackled. "Well, let me tell you this! Mary Gibson that worked out here as maid until last Wednesday saw that deed o' mine in your bureau drawer. She told me herself!"

"How dare you say such a thing!" gasped Mrs. Burmaster.

Mr. Burmaster stepped between his wife and Mrs. Lear.

"Enough of this!" he said firmly, "We know nothing about the deed to your property, Mrs. Lear."

"Then prove that it ain't here!" the old lady challenged. "Look in your wife's bureau drawer and see!"

"Certainly. Since you have made such an accusation we shall by all means disprove it."

As Mr. Burmaster started toward the circular stairway, his wife caught nervously at his arm.

"No, John! Don't be so weak as to give in to her!"

"Mrs. Lear has made a very serious accusation against you. We must prove to all these people that she misjudged you."

"You can't search—you mustn't! It's insulting to me!"

"But my dear—"

"I'll never speak to you again if you do! Never!"

Mr. Burmaster hesitated, not knowing what to do. "So you're afraid to look?" Mrs. Lear needled him.

"No, I'm not afraid," the estate owner said with sudden decision. "Furthermore, I want someone to accompany me as witness." His gaze swept the little group and singled out Penny. "Will you come?"

Penny did not wish to be drawn into the feud, but as the others urged her to accompany Mr. Burmaster, she reluctantly agreed.

Mrs. Burmaster's bedroom was a luxurious chamber directly above the living room. There was a canopied bed with beautiful hangings and a dressing table that fairly took Penny's breath away.

"There's the bureau," said Mr. Burmaster, pointing to another massive piece of furniture. "Suppose you search."

Rather reluctantly, Penny opened the top drawer. It was filled with lace handkerchiefs, and neat boxes of stockings. The second drawer contained silk lingerie while the third was filled with odds and ends.

"So it's not there!" Mr. Burmaster exclaimed in relief as Penny straightened from her task. "I was sure it wouldn't be!"

From the tone of his voice it was evident that he had been very much afraid the deed would be found. Penny's eyes wandered toward the dressing table.

"You may as well search there too," Mr. Burmaster said. "Then there can be no further accusations."

One by one Penny opened the drawers of the dressing table. Mrs. Burmaster's jewel box caught her eye. It was filled to overflowing with bracelets, pins, and valuable necklaces. Just behind the big silver box, another object drew her attention. At a glance she knew that it was a legal document. As she picked it up she saw that it was the deed to Mrs. Lear's property.

"What's that?" Mr. Burmaster demanded sharply when Penny did not speak.

Without answering, she gave him the document.

"It is the deed!" he exclaimed, dumbfounded. "Then my wife did steal it from Mrs. Lear! But why—why would she do such a thing?"

"I'm sure she didn't realize—"

"Mrs. Burmaster is a sick woman, a very sick woman," the estate owner said unhappily. "But what must I do?"

"What can you do except go downstairs and tell the truth?"

"Face them all? Admit that my wife is a thief?"

"It seems to me that the only honorable thing is to return the deed to Mrs. Lear."

"The deed must be returned," Mr. Burmaster acknowledged. "But not tonight—later."

"I realize that you wish to protect your wife," Penny said quietly. "It's natural. But Mrs. Lear has to be considered."

"I'll pay you handsomely to keep quiet about this," Mr. Burmaster said. "Furthermore, I'll promise to return the deed to Mrs. Lear tomorrow."

Penny shook her head.

"Very well then," Mr. Burmaster sighed. "I suppose I must face them. I don't mind for myself. It's my wife I'm worried about. She's apt to go into hysterics."

Tramping down the stairs, the estate owner confronted the little group of villagers. In a few words he acknowledged that the deed had been found, apologized to Mrs. Lear, and placed the document in her hands. Throughout the speech Mrs. Burmaster stood as one stricken. Her face flushed as red as the robe she wore, then became deathly white.

"I thank you, Mr. Burmaster, you're an honorable man," Mrs. Lear said stiffly. "I feel mighty sorry for the way things turned out. Maybe—"

"Oh, yes, everyone can see that you're sorry!" Mrs. Burmaster broke in shrilly. "You're a hateful, schem-

ing old hag. Now get out of my house! Get out all of you and never come back!"

"About the dam—" Silas Malcom started to say.

"The dam!" Mrs. Burmaster screamed. "Let it break! I wish it would! Then I'd never see any of you again! Go on—get out! Do you hear me? Get out!"

The little group retreated toward the door. Mrs. Burmaster did not wait to see the villagers leave. Weeping hysterically, she ran from the room.

CHAPTER

18

FLOOD WATERS

RAIN SPLATTERED steadily against the car windows as the noon passenger train pulled from the Witch Falls station. Penny and Louise watched the plump drops join into fat rivulets which raced one another to the sill. Since saying goodbye to Mrs. Lear, Silas Malcom, and their other valley friends, they had not done much talking. They felt too discouraged.

"I wish we'd decided to catch the train at Delta," Penny remarked, settling herself for the long ride home. "Then we could have said goodbye to Joe Quigley. We'll be passing through the station soon."

Louise nodded morosely.

"Things certainly ended in one grand mess," she commented. "Mrs. Lear got the deed to her property back, but the feud will be worse than ever now. Furthermore, we never did solve the Headless Horseman mystery—not that it matters."

Reaching for a discarded newspaper which lay on

the coach seat, Penny shot her chum a quick, knowing look.

"Just what does that mean?" Louise demanded alertly.

Penny pretended not to understand.

"You gave me one of those wise-owl looks!" Louise accused. "Just as if you *had* solved the mystery."

"I assure you I haven't, and never will now that we're leaving the valley."

"But you do have an idea who was back of the scheme?"

"Mrs. Lear, of course. We saw that much with our own eyes."

"But we didn't learn who actually rode the horse. Or did you?"

"Not exactly."

"You do know then!"

"No," Penny denied soberly. "I noticed something about the rider that made me think—but then I'd better not say it."

"Please go on."

"No, I have no proof. It would only be a guess."

"I think you're mean to keep me in the dark," Louise pouted.

"Maybe I'll tell you my theory later," Penny replied, opening the newspaper. "Just now, I'm not in the mood."

Both girls had been strangely depressed by their

last few hours in the valley. Mrs. Lear had refused to come with them or to seek refuge in the hills. Gleeeful at her victory over Mrs. Burmaster, she had seemed insensible to danger.

"Look at this headline," Penny said, indicating the black type of the newspaper. "FLOOD MENACES RED VALLEY!"

Quickly the girls scanned the story. The account mentioned no facts new to them. It merely repeated that residents of the valley were alarmed by heavy up-state rains which had raised Lake Huntley to a dangerous height behind the dam.

"Wonder if Salt got any good pictures when he was here yesterday?" Penny mused. "Probably not. This is the sort of news story that doesn't amount to much unless the big calamity falls."

"You don't think the dam actually will give way?" Louise asked anxiously.

"How should I know? Even the experts can't agree."

"At any rate we're leaving here, and I'm glad. Somehow, I've had an uneasy feeling ever since last night."

Penny nodded and glanced from the car window again. Rain kept splashing fiercely against the thick pane, half obscuring the distant hills. Along the right of way, muddy water ran in deep torrents, washing fence and hedgerow.

As the train snailed along toward Delta, there was increasing evidence of flood damage. A row of shacks near the railroad tracks was half submerged. Along the creek beds, giant trees bowed their branches to the swirling water. Many landmarks were completely blotted out.

"We're coming into Delta now," Penny presently observed. "Perhaps if we watch sharp we'll see Joe Quigley and can say goodbye."

The train stopped with a jerk while still some distance from the station. Then it pulled to a siding and there it waited. After ten minutes Penny sauntered through the train, thinking that if she could find an open door, she might get out and walk to the depot. Stopping a porter who was passing through the car, she asked him the cause of the delay.

"We'se waitin' fo' ordehs," the colored man answered. "Anyhow, dat's what de cap'n says."

"The captain?"

"The conducteh o' dis heah train."

"Oh! And what does he say about the high water?"

"He says de track between heah and Hobostein's a foot undeh."

"Then that means the river must be coming up fast. Any danger we'll be stranded at Delta?"

"You betteh talk to de conductor," the porter said,

jerking his head toward a fat, bespectacled trainman who had just swung aboard the coach. "Dat's Mr. Johnson."

Penny stopped the conductor to ask him what the chances were of getting through the flooded area.

"Doesn't look so good," he rumbled. "The rails are under at Mile Posts 792 and 825."

"Then we're tied up here?"

"No, we're going as far as we can," the conductor answered. The dispatcher's sending a work train on ahead to feel out the track. But we'll be lucky to make ten miles an hour."

Penny chatted with the conductor for a few minutes, then ambled back to the coach where she had left Louise. The prospects were most discouraging. At best it would be late afternoon before they could hope to reach Riverview.

"I'm starving too," Louise said. "I suppose there's no diner on this train."

As a stop gap the girls hailed a passing vendor and bought candy bars. Having thus satisfied their hunger, they tried to read magazines.

Presently the car started with a jerk. However, instead of proceeding toward the station it backed into the railroad yard.

"Now what?" Penny demanded impatiently. "Aren't we ever going to start?"

The porter hastened through the car, his manner noticeably nervous and tense. He paid no heed to a woman passenger who sought to detain him.

"Something's wrong!" Penny said with conviction.

"A wash-out, do you think?"

"Might be. Let's see what we can learn."

With a vague feeling of foreboding they could not have explained, the girls arose and followed the porter. Something was amiss. They were certain of it.

Losing sight of the colored man, they kept on until they reached the rear platform. Penny started to open the screen door. Just then the train whistle sounded a shrill, unending blast.

Startled, Louise gripped her chum's hand, listening tensely.

In the car behind, they heard the conductor's husky voice. He was shouting: "Run! Run, for your lives! Take to the hills!"

Penny was stunned for an instant. Then seizing Louise's arm, she pulled her out on the train platform. At first glance nothing appeared wrong. The tracks were well above the river level. Between the road bed and a high hill on the left, flood water was running like a mill race, but the ditch was narrow and represented no immediate danger.

"Listen!" Penny cried.

From far away there came a deep, rumbling roar not unlike the sound of distant thunder.

Leaning far over the train platform railing, Penny gazed up the tracks. The sight which met her eyes left her momentarily paralyzed.

Down the valley charged a great wall of water, taking everything before it. Trees had been mowed down. Crushed houses were being carried along like children's blocks. Far up the track a switch engine was lifted bodily from the rails and hurled backwards.

Penny waited to see no more.

"The dam's given away!" she shouted. "Quick, Louise! Climb over the railing and run for your life!"

TRAGEDY

LEAPING OVER the platform railing, Penny held up her arms to assist Louise. Now awakened to danger, her chum scrambled wildly after her only to stop aghast as she beheld the gigantic wall of water rushing toward them.

"Jump the ditch and make for the hill!" Penny ordered tersely. "Be quick!"

Passengers were pouring from the other cars, their terrified cries drowned by the grinding roar of the onrushing torrent. The wall of water moved with incredible speed. It tore into the railroad yard, shattering a tool house and a coal dock. It roared on, sweeping a row of empty box cars into its maw.

Spurred by the sight, Penny and Louise tried to leap the ditch. They fell far short and both plunged into the boiling water up to their arm pits.

Penny's feet anchored solidly. With a gigantic shove, she helped Louise to safety. By swimming

with the current she then reached shore a few yards farther down the railroad right of way.

"Run!" she shouted to the bewildered, bedraggled Louise. "Up the hill!"

Scrambling over the muddy edge of the ditch, she raced after her chum for higher ground. Just then the wall of water swept into the siding. As the train was struck it seemed to shudder from the terrific impact, then slowly settled on its side.

"Horrible!" Louise shuddered. "Some of the passengers may have been trapped in there!"

"Most of them escaped," Penny gasped. "There goes the water tower!"

A building borne by the flood, rammed into the ironwork of the big dripping tower. It crumpled, falling with a great, shuddering splash.

With the back-wash of the flood sloshing against their knees, the girls raced for high ground. Reaching a point midway up the hill where other passengers had paused, they turned to glance below. Yellow, angry water, rising easily ten feet, flowed over the railroad right of way.

With unbelievable speed the flood rolled on. In one angry gulp it reached a long freight train farther down the track. The caboose and a string of coal cars were lifted and hurled. Strangely, the coal tender and engine which had been detached, remained on the rails.

"Oh, look!" Louise gasped in horror. "The engineer's trapped in the cab!"

The trainman, plainly visible, valiantly kept the engine whistle blowing. Higher and higher rose the water. Penny and Louise were certain the courageous man must meet his doom. But the crest of the flood already had swept on down the valley, and in a moment the waters about the engine remained at a standstill.

So quickly had disaster struck that the girls could not immediately comprehend the extent of the tragedy. From their own train nearly all of the passengers had escaped. But the town of Delta had not fared so well. Apparently the flood had roared through the low section, taking all before it. Farther up the valley, directly below Huntley Lake where the gorge was narrow, damage to life and property might be even greater.

"What chance could poor Mrs. Lear have had," Louise said brokenly. "Or the Burmasters."

"There's a possibility they took to the hills in time."

"I doubt it," Louise said grimly. "The flood came so quickly."

Already the yellow, muddy waters were carrying evidence of their work. Houses, many with men and women clinging desperately to rooftops, floated past. Other helpless victims clung to logs, orange crates and chicken coops. At terrific speed they sailed past the

base of the hillside. Several shouted piteously for help.

"We must do something to save those people!"

Penny cried desperately.

"What?" Louise asked.

By this time the hillside was dotted with people who had saved themselves. Several of the women were weeping hysterically. Another had fainted. For the most part, everyone stared almost stupidly at the endless stream of debris which was swept down the valley. No one knew how to aid the agonized victims who clung to whatever their fingers could clutch.

On one rooftop, Penny counted six persons. The sight drove her to action.

"If only we had a rope—" she cried, and broke off as her eyes roved up the hillside.

Two hundred yards away stood a farmhouse.

"I'll see if I can get one there!" she cried, darting away.

The hill was steep, the ground soft. Penny's wet clothing impeded her. She tripped over a stone and fell, but scrambling up, ran on. Finally, quite out of breath, she reached the farmhouse. A woman with two small children clinging to her dress, met the girl in the yard.

"Ain't it awful?" she murmured brokenly. "My husband's workin' down at the Brandale Works. Did the flood strike there?"

"It must have spread through all of Delta," Penny answered. "This disaster's going to be frightful unless we can get help quickly. Do you have a telephone?"

"Yes, but it's dead. The wire runs into Delta."

Penny had been afraid of that. She doubted that a single telephone pole had been left standing in the town. Nor was it likely that the other valley cities had 'phone service.

"Do you have a rope?" she asked. "A long one?"

"In the barn. I'll get it."

The woman came back in a moment, a coil of rope over her arm.

"Send some of those poor folks up here," she urged as Penny started away with the rope. "I'll put on a wash boiler of coffee and take care of as many as I can."

Half sliding, Penny descended the steep hillside. During her absence two persons had been rescued from the water by means of an improvised lasso made from torn strips of clothing. Others were drifting past, too far away to be reached.

A woman and a child floated past, clinging to a log. Penny stood ready, the rope coiled neatly at her feet. She took careful aim, knowing that if she missed she would have no second chance.

Penny hurled the rope and it ran free, falling just ahead of the helpless pair. The half-drowned mother

reached with one hand and seized it before it sank beneath the surface.

"Hold on!" Penny shouted. "Don't let go!"

Several men ran to help her. By working together, they were able to pull the woman and her child to safety.

Abandoning the rope to skilled hands, Penny rounded the hill to a point providing a clear view of the flooded railroad yard. The roundhouse, the coal chutes and the signal tower were gone. But her heart leaped to see that the station was still standing. Built on high ground it was surrounded with water which did not appear to be deep.

Penny turned to Louise who had followed her. Just then they both heard someone shout that the railroad bridge was being swept away. They saw the massive steel structure swing slowly from its stone foundation. One side held firm which immediately set up great swirling currents. Any persons carried that way would be faced with destruction in the whirling pools of water.

"It's too late to warn the towns directly below Delta!" Penny gasped. "But there still may be time to get a message through to Hobostein. In any case, we must get help here!"

"But how?" Louise asked hopelessly. "Any wires that were left standing must have been torn away when the bridge went."

Penny gazed again toward the Delta depot. Between it and the hillside ran a fast-moving stretch of water, yet separated from the main body of the racing flood.

"If only I could get over to the station, I might somehow send a message!"

"Don't be crazy!" Louise remonstrated. "You haven't a chance to cross that stretch of water!"

"I think I could. I'm a pretty fair swimmer."

"But the current is so swift."

"There's a certain amount of risk," Penny admitted soberly. "But we can't stand here and wait. Someone must do something to bring help."

"Don't do it, Penny!" Louise pleaded. "Please!"

Penny hesitated, but only for an instant. She understood perfectly that if she misjudged the strength of the current it would sweep her down—perhaps carry her along into the main body of water. Once in the grip of that angry torrent, no one could hope to battle against it.

The risk, however, was one she felt she must take. Struggling free from Louise's clinging hands, she kicked off her shoes and tucked up her skirt. Then she plunged into the swirling water.

CHAPTER

20

EMERGENCY CALL

THE CURRENT was much swifter than Penny had anticipated. It tugged viciously at her feet, giving her no opportunity to inch her way along the ditch. A dozen steps and she was beyond her depth, fighting desperately to keep from being swept with the current.

Although a strong swimmer, Penny found herself no match for the wild torrent. Only by going with it could she keep her head above water. To attempt to swim against it was impossible. Despairingly, she saw that she would miss the railroad station by many yards.

"I'll be swept into the main body of the flood!" she thought in panic. "I shouldn't have attempted it!"

Too late she tried to turn back toward the hillside. The swift current held her relentlessly. Struggling against it, her head went under. She choked as she breathed water, then fought her way to the surface again. The current carried her on.

After that first moment of panic, Penny did not waste her strength uselessly. Allowing the flood to carry her along, she took only a few slow strokes, swimming just enough to keep from being pulled beneath the surface. As calmly as she could she appraised the situation.

The station now was very close. Scarcely fifty yards separated her from it, but she knew her physical powers. Her strength was no match for that racing, swirling, debris-studded current. She could not hope to span the distance, short though it was.

Penny despaired. And then her heart leaped with new hope. Directly ahead, a foot and a half above the water's murky surface, rose a steel rod with red and green signal targets. She recognized the object as a switch stand, used by trainmen to open and close the passing track switch.

"If I could reach that steel rod I could hold on!" she thought. "But do I have the strength?"

The swift current swept Penny on toward the upright rod. She took three, four powerful strokes and reached frantically for the standard. Her fingers closed around the metal. The swift flowing water whipped her violently, but she held fast. Drawing herself close to the rod, she shoved her feet downward. Still she could find no bottom.

Hopefully, Penny glanced toward the station, now less than twenty-five yards away. Although water

completely surrounded the squat little building, it had not risen to the window level. Yet there was no sign of anyone near the place—no one to help her.

Still clinging to the rod, she groped again with her bare feet. This time she located a steel rail. By standing on it, she raised herself a few inches and found firm footing. Suddenly an idea came to her.

"If I shove off hard from this rail, maybe I can get enough momentum to carry me through the current! If I fail—"

Penny decided not to think about that. Releasing her hold on the rod, she pushed off with all her strength and began to swim. Digging her face into the water, she held her breath and put everything she had into each stroke. Pull, pull, pull—she had to keep on. Her breath was nearly gone, strength fast was deserting her. Yet to turn her head and gulp air might spell defeat when victory was near. She could feel the torrent swinging her downstream. She made a final, desperate spurt.

"I can't make it!" she thought. "I can't!"

Yet she struggled on. Then suddenly her churning feet struck a solid object. It was the brick platform of the station!

Raising her head, she saw the building loom up in front of her. The current no longer tugged at her body. She had reached quiet water.

Penny stood still a moment, regaining her breath.

Then she waded to the front door of the station. It could not be opened. Penny pounded and shouted. Her cries went unanswered.

"The place is deserted!" she thought with a sinking heart. "Joe Quigley must have taken to the hills when the flood came."

Slowly Penny waded around the building, unwilling to acknowledge failure. Somehow she had to get word of the disaster through to the outside world. Yet even if she did get inside the station, she was far from certain it would do any good. Telephone wires undoubtedly were down.

Penny made a complete circuit of the depot without seeing anyone. Sick with disappointment, she paused beside the glass-enclosed bay of the ticket office and peered inside. She could see no one. But as she pressed her face against the pane of glass she thought she heard the chatter of a telegraph instrument.

"That means there still must be a wire connection!" she thought hopefully.

Nearby, the flood had lodged a small board against the depot wall. Seizing it, Penny smashed the lower pane of glass with one well-aimed blow.

She scrambled through the opening, crawled over the operator's table and dropped to the floor. The little ticket office was deserted though Joe Quigley's hat still lay on the counter.

"If only I knew how to telegraph!" Penny despaired, hearing again the chatter of the instrument. "Just knowing Morse code won't help me much."

The telegraph sounder was signaling the station call for Delta: "D-A, D-A, D-A. Over and over it was repeated.

Penny hesitated and then went to the instrument. She opened the key and answered with the station call, "D-A."

"Where have you been for the past twenty minutes?" the train dispatcher sent angrily at top speed. "What's happened to No. 17?"

Penny got only part of the message and guessed at the rest. Nervously, at very slow speed, she tapped out in Morse code that the train had been washed off the track.

The dispatcher's next message came very slowly, disclosing that he knew from Penny's style of sending that he was talking to an amateur telegrapher.

"Where's Joe Quigley?" he asked in code.

"Don't know," Penny tapped again. "Station's half under water. Can you send help?"

"Shoot me the facts straight," came the terse order.

Penny described what had happened at Huntley Dam and told how the railroad bridge had washed out. In return the dispatcher assured her that a relief crew would be sent without delay.

"Stay on the job until relieved," was his final order.

Weak with excitement, Penny leaned back in her chair. Help actually was on the way! The dispatcher would notify the proper authorities and set in motion the wheels of various relief organizations. For the moment she had done all she could.

She listened tensely as the dispatcher's crisp call flashed over the wire. He was notifying stations farther up the line to hold all trains running into the valley. Repeatedly Penny heard the call "W-F" which she took to be Witch Falls. It went unanswered.

Half sick with dread, she waited, hoping for a response. It was likely, almost a certainty that the station had been swept away, for the town would have been squarely in the path of the flood. What had happened to old Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters? Penny tried not to think about it.

Unexpectedly, the outside office door opened. Joe Quigley, bedraggled and haggard, one arm hanging limp at his side, splashed toward the desk. Seeing Penny, he stopped short, yet seemed too dazed to question the girl's presence in the inner office.

"It's awful," he mumbled. "I was on the station platform when I saw that wall of water coming. Tried to warn the men in the roundhouse. Before I could cross the tracks, it was too late. One terrific crash and the roundhouse disappeared—"

"You're hurt," Penny cried as the agent reeled

against the wall. "Your arm is crushed. How did it happen?"

"Don't know," Joe admitted, sinking into a chair the girl offered. "I was knocked off my feet. Came to lying in a pile of boards that had snagged against a tree trunk." He stared at Penny as if really seeing her for the first time. "Say," he demanded, "how did you get in here?"

"Smashed the window. It was the only way."

The agent got to his feet, staggering toward the telegraph desk.

"I've got to send a message," he said jerkily. "No. 30's due at Rodney in twenty minutes—"

"All the trains have been stopped by the dispatcher," Penny reassured him, and explained how she had sent out the call for help.

Joe Quigley slumped back in the chair. "If you can telegraph, let the dispatcher know I'm on the job again. This hand of mine's not so hot for sending."

Penny obediently sent the stumbling message, but as she completed it the telegraph sounder became lifeless. Although she still could manipulate the key, the signals had faded completely.

"Now what?" she cried, bewildered.

"The wire's dead!" Quigley exclaimed. Anxiously he glanced toward the storage batteries, fearing that water had damped them out. However, the boxes were high above the floor and still dry.

"What can be wrong?" Penny asked the operator. "Anything can happen in a mess like this."

Reaching across the table with his good hand, Quigley tested the wire by opening and closing the lifeless telegraph key.

"It's completely out," he declared with finality.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

Quigley got to his feet. "There's just one chance. The wire may have grounded when the bridge was swept away. Then if it tore loose again we'd be out of service."

"In that case we're up against it."

"Maybe not," Quigley replied. He splashed across the room to the switchboard. "If that should happen to be the trouble, we can ground it here."

He inserted a plug in the groundplate of the switchboard. Immediately the sounder came to life, closing with a sharp click.

"I call that luck!" grinned Quigley. "Now let's try that dispatcher. Want to get him on the wire for me?"

Penny nodded and sat down at the desk again. Insistently she sent out the call, "D-S, D-S, D-S." All the while as she kept the key moving, her thoughts raced ahead. She was afraid that persons had lost their lives in the flood. Property damage was beyond estimate. But catastrophe spelled Big News and she was certain her father would want every detail of the

story for the *Riverview Star*. If only she could send word to him!

"What's the matter?" Quigley asked, his voice impatient. "Can't you get an answer?"

Just then it came—a crisp "I—DS" which told the two listeners that the train dispatcher again was on the wire.

Quigley took over, explaining the break in service and giving the dispatcher such facts as he desired. Hovering at the agent's elbow, Penny asked him if the dispatcher would take an important personal message.

"For the *Riverview Star*," she added quickly. "My father's newspaper."

"I doubt he'll do it," Quigley discouraged her. "This one wire is needed for vital railroad messages. But we'll see."

He tapped out a message and the reply came. It was sent so fast that Penny could not understand the code. Quigley translated it as "Okay, but make it brief."

With no time to compose a carefully worded message, Penny reported the bare facts of the disaster. She addressed the message to her father and signed her own name.

"There, that's off," Quigley said, sagging back in his chair.

Penny saw that the station agent was in no condition to carry on his work.

"You're in bad shape," she said anxiously. "Let me bandage that smashed hand."

"It's nothing. I'll be okay."

"I'll find something to tie it up with," Penny insisted.

In search of bandage material, she crossed the room to a wall closet. As she reached for the door handle, Quigley turned swiftly in his chair.

"No, not there!" he exclaimed.

Penny already had opened the door. Her gaze fastened upon a white roll of cloth on the top shelf. She reached for it and it came fluttering down into her hands—a loose garment fashioned somewhat like a cape with tiny slits cut for eyes. In an instant she knew what it was. Slowly she turned to face Joe Quigley.

"So it was you!" she whispered accusingly. "The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow!"

CHAPTER

21

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED

JOE QUIGLEY did not deny the accusation. He slumped at the telegraph desk, staring straight before him.

"Why did you do it?" Penny asked. "How could you?"

"I don't know—now," Quigley answered heavily. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Penny shook out the garment. The whole, when worn over one's head, would give an appearance of a sheeted goblin with body cut off at the shoulders. She tore off a long strip of the material and began to wrap Quigley's injured hand.

"You've known for a long time, haven't you?" he asked diffidently.

"I suspected it, but I wasn't sure," Penny replied. "Your style of riding is rather spectacular. Last night when I saw Trinidad leap the barrier at Sleepy Hollow I thought I knew."

"Nothing matters now," Quigley said, self accusingly. "Sleepy Hollow's gone."

"Don't you think Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters had any chance to reach the hills?"

"I doubt it. When the dam broke, the water raced down the valley with the speed of an express train. Probably they were caught like rats in a trap."

"It seems too horrible."

"I knew this would happen," Quigley went on. "It was what I fought against. We tried through the Delta Citizens' Committee to get Burmaster to help repair the dam before it was too late. You know what luck we had."

"So failing in ordinary methods, you tried to bring him around with your Headless Horseman stunt?"

"It was a foolish idea," Quigley acknowledged. "Mrs. Lear really put me up to it—not that I'm trying to throw any blame on her. She never liked Mrs. Burmaster, and for good reasons. The Headless Horseman affair started out as a prank, and then I thought I saw a chance to influence Burmaster that way."

"At that he might have come around if it hadn't been for his wife."

"Yes, she was against the town from the first. She hated everyone. Why, she believed that our only thought was to get her away from the valley just to trick her."

"I guess it doesn't matter now," Penny said. "The estate's gone and everyone with it. Somehow I can't realize it—things happened so fast."

"This is a horrible disaster, and it will be worse if help doesn't get here fast," Quigley replied. "Fortunately, the water doesn't seem to be coming higher."

Penny had completed a rough bandaging job on the station agent's hand. Thanking her, he got up to test the two office telephones. Both were out of service.

Presently a message came in over the telegraph wire. It was addressed to Penny and was from her father. Quigley copied it on a pad and handed it to her.

"Thank God you are safe," the message read. "A special circuit will be cut through to the Delta station as soon as possible. Can you give us a complete, running story of the flood?"

"What's a running story?" Quigley asked curiously.

"I think Dad wants me to gather every fact I can," Penny explained. "He wants a continuous story—enough material to fill a wire for several hours."

"You'll do it?"

"I don't know," Penny said doubtfully. "I've never handled a story as big as this—I've had no experience on anything so important."

"There's no other person to do it."

"I want to find Louise," Penny went on, rereading the message. "I ought to try to learn what happened to poor Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters."

"Listen," Quigley argued quietly. "You can't do anything for your friends now. Don't you see it's your duty to get news out to the country? Your father expects it of you."

Penny remained silent.

"Don't you realize there's no one else to send the news?" Quigley demanded. "You're probably the only reporter within miles of here."

"But I'm not really a reporter. I've written stories for Dad's paper, it's true. But not big stories such as this."

"Red Valley needs help. The only way to get it is by arousing the public. Do I wire your father 'yes' or 'no'?"

"Make it 'yes,'" Penny decided. "Tell Dad I'll try to have something for him in an hour."

"You'll need longer than that," Quigley advised. "Anyhow, it's apt to be several hours before we get a special wire through."

While the agent sent the message, Penny searched the office for pencil and paper.

"You won't get far without shoes," Quigley said over his shoulder. "What became of yours?"

"Left them over on the hillside."

"Well, you can't go back for them now," Quigley

replied, gazing ruefully through the window at the racing torrent which separated the station from the high hill. "Let's see what we can find for you."

He rummaged through the closet and came upon a pair of boots which looked nearly small enough for Penny.

"We had a boy who wore those when he worked here," he explained. "See if they'll do. And here's my coat."

"Oh, I can't take it," Penny protested. "You'll need it yourself."

"No, I'm sticking here at my post," Quigley answered. "I'll be warm enough."

He insisted that Penny wear the coat. She left the station and waded toward higher ground. The coat over her drenched clothing offered only slight protection from the chill wind. With the sun dropping low, she knew that soon she would actually suffer from cold.

Penny wondered where to start in gathering vital facts for her father. The flood had followed the narrow V-shaped valley, cutting a swath of destruction above Delta, and there spreading out to the lowlands. She decided to tour the outlying section of Delta first, view the wreckage and question survivors.

"If only Salt were here!" she thought. "Dad would want pictures, but there's no way for me to take them."

Keeping to the hillside, Penny reached a high point of land overlooking what had been the town of Delta. Two or three streets remained as before. One of the few business places still standing was the big white stone building that housed the local telephone company. Elsewhere there was only water and scattered debris.

Penny headed up the valley, passing and meeting groups of bedraggled refugees who had taken to the hills at the first alarm. She questioned everyone. Nevertheless, definite information eluded her. How many lives had been lost? How great was the property damage? What fate had befallen Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters? No one seemed to know.

Half sick with despair, she kept on. She jotted down names and facts. Mr. Bibbs, an old man who ran a weekly newspaper at Delta, was able to help her more than anyone else. Not only did he give her a partial list of the known missing, but he recited many other facts that had escaped Penny.

"A million thanks—" she began gratefully, but he waved her into silence.

"Just get back to the railroad station and send your story," he urged.

Penny lost all count of time as she retraced her way along the muddy hillside. Everywhere she saw suffering and destruction. Her mind was so numbed to

the sight that she recorded impressions automatically.

It was long after nightfall before Penny reached the station. Every muscle protested as she dragged herself wearily to the doorstep. During her absence the flood had lowered by nearly a foot. However, the current remained swift, and she steadied herself for a moment against the building wall.

"Who's there?" called Quigley sharply.

"Penny Parker."

"Okay, come on in," the agent invited. "Thought you might be a looter."

Penny pushed open the door. The waiting room was filled with men, women and children who slumped in cold misery on the uncomfortable row of seats. Few were provided with any warm clothing.

Penny splashed through the dark, musty room to the inner office. Quigley had lighted a smoky oil lamp which revealed that he had made himself a bed on top of the telegraph desk.

"I'm turning in for the night," he explained. "There's nothing more we can do until morning."

"How about my story to the *Star*?" Penny asked wearily. "Is the special wire set up yet?"

"Don't make me laugh," Quigley replied. "The Dispatcher's wire went out for good over an hour ago. Too bad you killed yourself to get that story, because it will have to wait."

"But it mustn't wait," Penny protested. "Dad's counting on me. I gave my promise. How about the telephone company?"

"Their lines are all down."

"Western Union?"

"It's the same with them. Repair crews are on their way here but it will take time. The valley's completely cut off from communication."

"For how long?"

"Listen, Penny, you know as much about it as I do. The airfields are under water."

"How about the roads?"

"Open only part of the way."

Completely discouraged, Penny sagged into a chair by the ticket counter. She was wet through, plastered with mud, hungry, and tired enough to collapse. After all of her work and suffering, her efforts had been in vain. By morning experienced city reporters and photographers would swarm into the valley. Her scoop would be no scoop at all.

"Oh, brace up," Quigley encouraged carelessly.

"But I've failed Dad. It would mean a lot to him to get an exclusive story of this disaster. I gave him my promise I'd send the facts—now I've failed."

"It's not your fault the wire couldn't be set up," Quigley tried to encourage her. "Here, I managed to get ahold of a blanket for you. Wrap up in it and

grab some sleep. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

"I guess you're right," Penny acknowledged gloomily.

Taking off the muddy boots, she rolled herself into the warm blanket. Curling up into the chair she pillowed her head on the desk and slept the untroubled sleep of complete exhaustion.

WANTED—A WIRE

TOWARD MORNING Penny awoke to find her limbs stiff and cramped. Murky, fetid water still flowed over the floor of the station. However, it had lowered during the night, leaving a rim of oozy mud to mark the office walls. The first ray of light streamed through the broken window.

Penny yawned and stretched her cramped feet. She felt wretched and dirty. Her clothing was stiff and caked with mud. She scraped off what she could and washed face and hands in a basin of water she found at the back end of the room.

When she returned, Joe Quigley was awake.

"My neck! My arm! My whole anatomy!" he complained, rubbing a hand over his stubbly beard. "I'm a cripple for life."

"I feel the same way," Penny grinned. "I'm hungry too. Anything to eat around here?"

"Not a crumb. The folks out in the waiting room

broke into all the vending machines last night. There's not so much as a piece of candy left."

"And there's no place in Delta where food can be bought."

"Not that I know of. Only a few relief kitchens were set up last night. They can't begin to take care of the mob."

Penny peered out into the crowded waiting room. Mothers with babies in their arms had sat there all night. Some of the refugees were weeping; others accepted their lot with stoical calm. Seeing such misery, Penny forgot her own hunger and discomfort.

"Don't you think help will come soon?" she asked Quigley.

"Hard to tell," he replied. "It should."

Penny went out into the waiting room but there was very little she could do to help the unfortunate sufferers. She gave one of the women her blanket.

"That was foolish of you," Quigley told her a moment later. "You'll likely need it yourself."

"I'd rather go without," Penny replied. "Anyway, I can't bear to stay here any longer. I'm going to the telephone office."

"Why there?"

"The building stands high and should be one of the first places to reopen," Penny declared hopefully. "Maybe I can get a long distance call through to Dad."

"Better leave some of your story with me," advised Quigley. "If we get a wire before the telephone company does, I'll try to send it for you."

Penny scribbled a hundred word message, packing it solidly with facts. If ever it reached Riverview a *Star* rewrite man could enlarge it to at least a column.

Saying goodbye to Joe, Penny made her way toward all that remained of Delta's business section. She had not seen Louise since the previous afternoon and was greatly worried about her.

"I know she's safe," she told herself. "But I must find her."

Penny was not alone on the devastated streets. Refugees wandered aimlessly about, seeking loved ones or treasured possessions. Long lines of shivering people waited in front of a church that had been converted into a soup kitchen.

Penny joined the line. Just as a woman handed her a steaming cup of hot broth, she heard her name spoken. Turning quickly, she saw Louise running toward her from across the street.

"Penny! Penny!" her chum cried joyfully.

"Careful," Penny cautioned, balancing the cup of soup. "This broth is as precious as gold."

"Oh, you poor thing!" cried Louise, hugging her convulsively. "You look dreadful."

"That's because I'm so hungry," Penny laughed. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, I stayed at that farmhouse on the hill last night. I actually had a bed to sleep in and a good hot breakfast this morning. But I've been dreadfully worried about you."

"And that goes double," answered Penny. "Wait until I gobble this soup, and we'll compare notes."

She drank the broth greedily and the girls walked away from the church. Penny then told of her experiences since leaving her chum on the hillside. Louise was much relieved to learn that word had been sent to Riverview of their safety.

"But what of Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters?" she asked anxiously. "Have you heard what happened to them?"

Penny shook her head. "Joe Quigley thinks they didn't have a chance."

"I can't comprehend it somehow," Louise said with a shudder. "It just doesn't seem possible. Why, we were guests in Mrs. Lear's home less than twenty-four hours ago."

"I know," agreed Penny soberly. "I keep hoping that somehow they escaped."

"If only we could learn the truth."

"There's not a chance to get through now," Penny said slowly. "The water's gone down a little, but not enough."

"If we had a boat—"

"The current is still so swift we couldn't handle it."

"I suppose not," Louise admitted hopelessly. "When do you suppose the Relief folks will get here?"

"They should be moving in at any time. And when they come they'll probably be trailed by a flock of reporters and photographers."

"This flood will be a big story," Louise acknowledged.

"Big? It's one of the greatest news stories of the year! And here I am, helpless to send out a single word of copy."

"You mean that folks outside of the valley don't know about the flood?" Louise gasped.

"The news went out, but only as a flash. Before we could give any details, our only wire connection was lost."

"Then the first reporter to get his news out of the valley will have a big story?"

"That's the size of it," Penny nodded. "The worst of it is that Dad's depending upon me."

"But he can't expect you to do the impossible. If there are no wire connections it's not your fault. Anyhow, as soon as one is set up you'll be able to send your story."

"Other reporters will be here by that time. Experienced men. Maybe they'll get the jump on me."

"I'll venture they won't!" Louise said with emphasis. "You've never failed yet on a story."

"This is more than a story, Lou. It's a great human tragedy. Somehow I don't feel a bit like a reporter—I just feel bewildered and rather stunned."

"You're tired and half sick," Louise said. She linked arms with Penny and guided her away from the long line of refugees.

"Where to?" she asked after they had wandered for some distance.

"I was starting for the telephone company office when I met you."

"Why the telephone office?" Louise asked.

"Well, it's high and dry. I thought that by some chance they might have a wire connection."

"Then let's go there by all means," urged Louise.

Farther down the debris-clogged street the girls came to the telephone company offices. The building, one of the newest and tallest in Delta, had been gutted by the flood. However, the upper floors remained dry and emergency quarters had been established there. Nearly all employees were at their posts.

Penny and Louise pushed their way through the throng of refugees that had taken possession of the lower floor. Climbing the stairs to the telephone offices they asked to see the manager.

"Mr. Nordwall isn't seeing anyone," they were informed. "He's very busy."

Penny persisted. She explained that her business was urgent and concerned getting a news story

through to Riverview. After a long delay she was allowed to talk to the manager, a harassed, overworked man named Nordwall.

"Please state your case briefly," he said wearily.

Penny explained again that she wished to get a story of the flood through to her father's paper, and asked what hope there was.

"Not much, I'm afraid," the man replied. "We haven't a single toll line at present."

"How soon do you expect to get one?"

The manager hesitated, unwilling to commit himself. "By noon we may have one wire west," he said reluctantly.

Penny asked if she could have first chance at it. Nordwall regretfully shook his head.

"Relief work must come before news."

"Then there's no way to get my story out?"

"I suggest that you place your call in the usual way," Mr. Nordwall instructed. "I'll tell our Long Distance Chief Operator to put it ahead of everything except relief work messages."

Penny obeyed the manager's suggestion. However, she and Louise both knew that there was slight chance the call would go through in time to do any good.

"No use waiting around here," Penny said gloomily. "The wire won't even be set up before noon."

Leaving the telephone building, the girls sloshed

back toward the railroad. Suddenly Louise drew Penny's attention to an airplane flying low overhead. It flew so close to the ground that they could read "United Press," on the wings.

"Well, it looks as if the news boys are moving in," Penny observed. "Probably taking photographs of the flood."

The airplane circled Delta and then vanished eastward. Walking on, the girls met an armed soldier who passed them without a glance.

"The National Guard," Penny commented. "That means a road is open."

"And it means that help is here at last!" Louise cried. "Property will be protected now and some order will be established!"

Penny remained silent.

"Aren't you glad?" Louise demanded, staring at her companion.

"Yes, I'm glad," Penny said slowly. "I truly am. But the opening of the road means that within a very little while every news service in the country will have men here."

"And you've lost your chance to send an exclusive story to the *Star*."

"I've let Dad down," Penny admitted. "He depended upon me and I failed him dismally."

TOLL LINE TO RIVERVIEW

PENNY AND Louise trudged slowly on toward the railroad tracks. They were too discouraged for much conversation, and avoided speaking of Mrs. Lear or the Burmasters. Sleepy Hollow had been washed away, but no one could tell them what had happened to the unfortunate ones caught in the valley.

"It doesn't matter now," Penny said dispiritedly, "but I know who masqueraded as the Headless Horseman. Joe Quigley."

"The station agent!"

"Yes, he told me about it last night. Of course Mrs. Lear let him use her horse, and no doubt she encouraged him in the idea."

"They did it to plague the Burmasters?"

"Joe thought he could bring Mr. Burmaster around to his way of thinking about the Huntley Dam."

"How stupid everyone was," Louise sighed. "If

it hadn't been for Mrs. Burmaster's stubbornness, her husband might have given the money to save the dam. Then this dreadful disaster would have been prevented."

Penny nodded absently. Her gaze was fixed upon a stout man just ahead who wore climbing irons on his heavy shoes. She nudged Louise.

"See that fellow?"

"Why, yes. What about him?"

"I'm sure he's a telephone lineman. Probably he's working on the line by the railroad."

"Probably," Louise agreed, without much interest.

"Come on," Penny urged, quickening pace. "Let's talk to him."

The girls overtook the workman and fell into step. Penny questioned him and readily learned that he was working close by at the washed-out railroad bridge.

"We're aiming to shoot a wire across the river," the man volunteered. "It's going to be one tough little job."

"Mind if we go along?" Penny asked eagerly.

"It's okay with me," the telephone man consented. "Hard walking though."

Flood waters had receded from the railroad right-of-way leaving a long stretch of twisted rails and slimey road-bed. They waded through the mud, soon coming to the break where the bridge had swung aside. Debris of every variety had piled high against

the wrecked steel structure. Flood water boiled through the gap at a furious rate.

"I don't see how they'll ever get a cable across there," Penny commented dubiously.

"Coast Guardsmen are helping us," the lineman explained. "They'll shoot it over with a Lyle gun—we hope."

Penny and Louise wandered toward the gap in the roadbed. On both shores, linemen and cable splicers were hard at work. Coast Guardsmen already had set up their equipment and all was in readiness to shoot a cable across the river.

"Okay, let 'er go!" rang out the terse order. "Stand clear!"

A Coast Guardsman raised the Lyle gun. Making certain that the steel wire would run free, he released the trigger. The weighted cable flashed through the air in a beautiful arch only to fall short of its goal.

"Not enough allowance for the wind," the guardsman said in disgust. "We'll need a heavier charge."

The gun was reloaded, and again the wire spun from its spool. Again it fell short of the far shore by three feet. Undaunted by failure, the men tried once more. This time the aim was true, and the heavy powder charge carried rod and cable to its mark.

"They've done it!" Penny cried jubilantly. "Now it shouldn't be long before we get a wire connection with the outside world!"

Immediately telephone company men seized the flexible cable, anchoring it solidly. Heavy cables then were drawn across and made fast, permitting a courageous lineman in a bosun's chair to work high above the turbulent river.

"If that cable should break, he'd be lost!" Louise said with a shudder. "It makes me jumpy to watch him."

Fearlessly the man accomplished his task, suspending a temporary emergency telephone line. Cable splices promptly carried the ends of the new cable to terminal boxes.

So absorbed was Penny in watching the task that for a time she forgot her own urgent need of a message wire. But as she observed the men talking over a test phone, the realization suddenly came to her that a through wire had been established west from Red Valley.

"Lou, they've done it!" she exclaimed. "The wire connection is made!"

"It does look that way."

"If only I could use that test set to get my news story through to Dad!"

"Fat chance!"

"I'd still be the first to send out the story!" Penny went on excitedly. "It will do no harm to ask anyhow."

Breaking away from Louise, she sought the lineman

of her acquaintance. Eagerly she broached her request.

"Not a chance to use that line, Sister," he answered impatiently. "Our 'phones are for testing purposes only."

"But this is a very great emergency—"

"Sorry," the lineman brought her up short. "You'll have to put your call through the regular channels. Regulations."

Baffled by the cold refusal, Penny turned away. Even though she knew the telephone man had no authority to grant her request, she was none the less annoyed.

"This is enough to drive one mad!" she complained to Louise. "It may be hours before the downtown telephone office will offer toll service."

"Well, it does no good to fret about it," her chum shrugged. "There's nothing you can do."

"I'm not so sure about that," Penny muttered.

Her attention had been drawn to a man in a gray business suit who was talking earnestly to the fireman of the line gang.

"That's Mr. Nordwall!" she announced.

Again abandoning Louise, she pushed through the throng of spectators. Touching the man's arm to attract his attention, she said breathlessly:

"Mr. Nordwall, do you remember me?"

He gazed at her without recognition.

"I'm Penny Parker. I want to get a message through to my father."

"Oh, yes, now I remember!" the telephone company manager exclaimed. "You're trying to send a call through to Riverview."

"Is there any reason why I can't use the phone now—the test instrument?"

"Such a procedure would be very irregular."

"But it would save hours in getting my story through," Penny went on quickly. "Hundreds of persons are desperately in need of food and shelter. If the public can be aroused by newspaper publicity, funds will be subscribed generously. Mr. Nordwall, you must let me send my story!"

"This is a very great emergency," the manager agreed. "I'll see what can be done."

Penny waited, scarcely daring to hope. However, Mr. Nordwall kept his word. To the delight of the girls, the call was put through. Within ten minutes Penny was summoned to the test box.

"You have your connection with Riverview," she was told. "Go ahead."

Penny raised the receiver to her ear. Her hand trembled she was so nervous and excited. She spoke tensely into the transmitter: "Hello, is this the *Star* office?"

"Anthony Parker speaking," said the voice of her father.

"Dad, this is Penny! I have the story for you!"

She heard her father's voice at the other end of the line but it became so weak she could not distinguish a word. Nor could he understand her. The connection had failed.

CHAPTER

24

A BIG STORY

PENNY DESPAIRED, fearing that she never could make her father understand what she had to tell him. Then unexpectedly the wire trouble cleared and Mr. Parker's voice fairly boomed in her ear.

"Is that you, Penny? Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, Dad!" she answered eagerly. "And so is Louise! We have the story for you—couldn't get it out before."

"Thought we never would hear from you again," Mr. Parker said, his voice vibrant. "Your flash on the flood scooped the country. We're still ahead of the other newspapers. Shoot me all the facts."

Penny talked rapidly but distinctly. Facts had been imprinted indelibly on her memory. She had no need to refer to notes except to verify names. Now and then Mr. Parker interrupted to ask a question. When the story had been told he said crisply:

"You've done marvelously, Penny! But we'll need

more names. Get as complete a list of the missing as you can."

"I'll try, Dad."

"And pictures. So far all we have are a few airplane shots of the flooded valley. Can you get ahold of a camera?"

"I doubt it," Penny said dubiously.

"Try anyhow," her father urged. "And keep on the lookout for Salt Sommers. He's on his way there now with two reporters. They're bringing in a portable wire photo set."

"Then you plan to send flood pictures direct from here to Riverview?"

"That's the set up," Mr. Parker replied. "If you can get the pictures and have them waiting, we'll beat every other paper in the country!"

"I'll do my best," Penny promised. "But it's a hard assignment."

She talked a moment longer before abandoning the test 'phone to one of the linemen. Seeking Louise, she repeated the conversation.

"But how can we get a camera?" her chum asked hopelessly. "Delta's stores are under water—most of them at least."

Though the situation seemed impossible, the girls tramped from one debris-clogged street to another. After an hour's search they came upon a man who was snapping pictures with a box camera. Ques-

tioned by Penny, he agreed to part with it for twenty dollars.

"I haven't that many cents," Penny admitted. "But my father is owner of the *Riverview Star*. I'll guarantee that you'll receive your money later."

"How do I know I'll ever see you again?"

"You don't," said Penny. "You'll just have to trust me."

"You look honest," the man agreed after a pause. "I'll take a chance."

He gave Penny the camera, together with three rolls of film. The girls carefully wrote down his name and address.

"Now to get our pictures," Penny said, as she and Louise started on once more. "We'll take a few of the streets. Then I want to get some human-interest shots."

"How about the railroad station?" Louise suggested. "A great many of the refugees are being cared for there."

Penny nodded assent. Hastening toward the depot, they paused several times to snap pictures they thought were especially suitable for newspaper reproduction.

Along the railroad right-of-way crews of men were hard at work, but it was evident that it would be days before train service could be resumed.

Penny and Louise went into the crowded waiting

room of the depot. Joe Quigley had locked himself into the inner office, but even there he was surrounded by a group of argumentative young men.

"Reporters!" Penny observed alertly. "I knew it wouldn't take them long to get here!"

The newspaper men were bombarding Quigley with questions, demanding to know when and how they could send out their newspaper copy.

"I can't help you, boys," he said regretfully. "It will be two hours at least before we have wire service. Better try the telephone company."

Just then one of the newsmen spied Penny and her camera. Immediately he hailed her. The other reporters flocked about the two girls, offering to buy any of the films at fancy prices.

"Sorry," Penny declined. "My pictures are earmarked for the *Riverview Star*."

"What? Didn't you hear?" one of the men banted. "Their wire photo car broke down just this side of Hobostein. The *Star* won't move in here before night. By then your pictures will be old stuff."

"Better sell to us," urged another.

Penny shook her head. She wasn't sure whether or not the men were joking. In any case she meant to hold her pictures until her father released them.

Between Hobostein and Delta there was only one highway over which a car could pass. The arrival

of newspaper men led Penny to believe that this road now was open.

"Dad told me to keep a sharp watch for Salt Sommers," she said to Louise. "Let's post ourselves by the road where we can see incoming cars."

"What about the pictures we planned to take here?"

"I do want to snap one or two," Penny admitted. "It's embarrassing though, just to walk up to a group and ask to take a picture."

As the girls debated, the door swung open. Into the already over-crowded room stumbled a new group of refugees.

Suddenly Penny's gaze fastened upon a haggard woman who looked grotesque in a man's overcoat many sizes too large for her. The face was half-buried in the high collar, and she could not see it plainly. Then the woman turned, and Penny recognized her.

"Mrs. Burmaster!" she cried.

The woman stared at the two girls with leaden eyes. She did not seem to recognize them.

"Oh, we're so glad you're safe!" Penny cried, rushing to her. "Your husband?"

Mrs. Burmaster's lips moved, but no sound came. She seemed stunned by what she had gone through.

"Do you know what happened to Mrs. Lear?" Penny asked anxiously. "Have you heard?"

Even then Mrs. Burmaster did not speak. But a strange light came into her eyes.

"Tell me," Penny urged. "Please."

Her words seemed to penetrate the befogged mind of the dazed woman. Mrs. Burmaster's lips moved slightly. Penny bent closer to hear.

"Mrs. Lear is dead," the woman whispered. "She was drowned when she saved me."

CHAPTER

25

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

THE INFORMATION shocked Penny.

"Mrs. Lear—dead," she repeated. "Oh, I was hoping that somehow she escaped."

"She would have if it hadn't been for me," Mrs. Burmaster said dully. "Ten minutes before the dam gave way, a telephone warning was sent out. Mrs. Lear thought my husband and I might not have heard it. She rode her horse to Sleepy Hollow, intending to warn us."

"And then what happened?"

"Just as Mrs. Lear reached our place, the wall of water came roaring down the valley. We all ran out of the house, hoping to reach the hills. We did get to higher ground but we saw we couldn't make it. Mrs. Lear made my husband and me climb into a tree. Before she could follow us, the water came."

"Mrs. Lear was swept away?"

"Yes, we saw her struggling and then the water

carried her beyond sight." Mrs. Burmaster covered her face. "Oh, it was horrible! And to think that it was all my fault!"

"Where is your husband now?" Penny inquired kindly.

"Outside, I think," Mrs. Burmaster murmured. "We were brought here together in a boat."

Penny and Louise went outdoors and after a brief search found Mr. Burmaster. His clothing was caked with mud, his face was unshaven and he looked years older.

To his wife's story he could add little. "This has been a dreadful shock," he told Penny. "Now that it's too late I realize what a stubborn fool I was. My wife and I are responsible for Mrs. Lear's death."

"No, no, you mustn't say that," Penny tried to comfort him. "It was impossible for anyone to predict what would happen."

"Sleepy Hollow is gone—completely washed away," Mr. Burmaster went on bitterly. "The estate cost me a fortune."

"But you can rebuild."

"I never shall. My wife never could be happy in Red Valley. Now that this terrible thing has occurred, it would be intolerable to remain. I've been thinking matters over. I've decided to deed all the land I bought back to the valley folk. It's the least I can do to right a great wrong."

"It would be very generous of you," said Penny, her eyes shining.

The girls talked with Mr. Burmaster for a little while and then started toward US highway 20, intending to watch incoming cars. Ambulances, army and supply trucks now were flowing into Delta in a steady stream. However, midway there, they spied a car coming toward them which bore "*Riverview Star*" on its windshield.

"There's Salt now!" Penny cried, signaling frantically.

The car stopped with a jerk. The *Star* photographer sat behind the wheel, while beside him were two men from the paper's news department.

"Well, well," Salt greeted the girls jovially. He swung open the car door. "If it isn't Penny, the child wonder! Meet Roy Daniels and Joe Wiley."

Acknowledging the introduction, Penny and Louise squeezed into the front seat of the sedan. Driving on, Salt plied them with questions. Penny told him how rival newsmen had tried to buy her camera pictures.

"Good for you, hanging onto them!" Salt approved warmly. "Our car never did break down. By the way, where can we set up our portable wire photo equipment?"

"There's only one possibility. The telephone company. Right now they have the only wire service in Delta."

Penny directed Salt through the few streets that were clear of debris to the telephone building. There the portable wire photo equipment quickly was set up. Penny's camera pictures were developed, and though some of the shots were over-exposed there were four good enough to send over the network.

"Mr. Nordwall has six toll lines out of Delta now," Salt told the girls jubilantly. "He's letting us have one of them."

Carefully the photographer tested the controls of the wire photo machine. He listened briefly to the hum of the motor. Satisfied that everything was running properly, he attached one of the freshly printed pictures to the transmitting cylinder.

"Okay," he signaled to Mr. Nordwall. "Give us a toll to the *Riverview Star*."

Within a few minutes the order came: "Network clear. Go ahead, Delta."

Salt turned on a switch and the sending cylinder began to revolve. One by one Penny's pictures were transmitted over the wire.

"Your shots are the first to get out of Red Valley!" Salt told her triumphantly. "Your work's done now. Better crawl off somewhere and sleep."

Penny nodded wearily. She was glad to know that the *Star* would scoop every other paper in the country on the flood story and pictures. Still, for some reason she couldn't feel very happy about it. As she turned

away, Salt called: "Hey, wait! Your father's on the wire photo phone. He wants to talk to you."

Penny caught up the receiver eagerly.

"That you, Penny?" a blurred voice asked in her ear. "Congratulations! You came through with flying colors!"

"Guess I was lucky to come through at all," Penny said slowly. "Some weren't so fortunate."

"Just now the important thing is when are you coming home?" Mr. Parker asked. "Can you get here today?"

To Penny, the thought of home and a soft bed was more alluring than any other earthly bliss.

"I'll certainly try, Dad," she promised. "Yes, somehow I'll get there."

After Penny ended the conversation with her father, she and Louise talked to Salt about the prospects of a trip home. Regretfully he explained that with a big story to cover, he probably would not be leaving that day.

"But there are plenty of cars going out of here," he encouraged them. "Why not go down to the depot and make inquiries?"

The idea seemed an excellent one. At the station the girls talked again with Joe Quigley who assured them he knew of a car that was leaving very shortly.

"Hurry out to Highway 20 and I think you can catch the fellow," he urged.

Hastily saying goodbye not only to Joe but to Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster who remained in the crowded station, the girls went outside. As they rounded a corner of the building a voice fairly boomed at them: "Hello, folks!"

Penny and Louise whirled around to see Silas Malcom coming toward them. Clinging to his arm was a spry little woman in a borrowed coat and hat.

"Mrs. Lear!" gasped the girls in one voice.

"It takes more than a flood to wash me away!" chirped the old lady, bright as a cricket.

Penny and Louise rushed to embrace her. Eagerly they plied her with questions.

"I'm jist like a cat with nine lives," old Mrs. Lear chuckled. "When the flood carried me off, I didn't give up—not me. I was a purty good swimmer as a gal and I ain't so bad even now. I kinda went with the current until I got ahold of a log. There I clung until a Red Cross boat picked me up."

Mrs. Lear's safe arrival at Delta thrilled Penny and Louise. They rushed into the station to bring Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster who shared their great relief over the rescue. And Penny was delighted when Mr. Burmaster repeated to the old lady what he had told her—that he intended to allow his property to revert to the former tenants.

"That's mighty good of you, Mr. Burmaster," the old lady thanked him. "What we've been through

has taught us all a bitter lesson. I'm ashamed of the way I acted."

"You were justified in your attitude," the estate owner acknowledged.

"No, I wasn't. It was childish o' me tryin' to take my spite out on your wife. I'm especially sorry about the way I egged Joe Quigley onto that Headless Horseman trick."

"I was afraid you were behind it," smiled Mr. Burmaster. "Oh, well, it all seems trivial now. We'll forget everything."

"There are some things," said Penny quietly, "that I doubt we'll ever erase from our minds." She turned to the old lady and asked: "Won't you come to Riverview with Louise and me? You'll need a place to stay—"

Mrs. Lear's gaze met hers, challengingly but with a twinkle of humor.

"And what better place could I have than this?" she demanded with quiet finality. "Red Valley is my home, and my home it will be till the end o' time!"